

SPEECH

OF

HON. ISAAC PARRISH, OF OHIO,

1804 - 1860

DELIVERED IN COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON THE STATE OF THE UNION,

FEBRUARY 6, 1846,

ON THE

RESOLUTION TO TERMINATE THE CONVENTION WITH GREAT BRITAIN,

RELATING TO THE

TERRITORY "WEST OF THE STONY OR ROCKY MOUNTAINS."

WASHINGTON:

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SPEECH.

In the House of Representatives, February 6th, 1846—On the Joint Resolution to terminate the Convention with Great Britain, in relation to Oregon, in Committee of the Whole, Mr. PARRISH obtained the floor, and said :

Mr. CHAIRMAN : As expressing my views on some questions connected with the one now before the committee, I send to the Clerk's desk the following Resolutions, which I had prepared some weeks since, and which I intend to offer so soon as an opportunity shall be afforded :

“ *Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives in Congress assembled, That the political opinion which inculcates that this Government cannot enlarge its territorial limits by discovery or treaty, or increase the number of States in its Union, without endangering its peace, its strength, and its perpetuity : as also the political opinion that any such enlargement or admission evinces a spirit of aggrandizement, of conquest, or of ambition, are opinions emanated by the advocates of arbitrary governments, which are proven false in our own experience, and cannot be admitted by the American people.*

Resolved, That whilst we concede to European forms of Government, where in theory the Crown is the source from which all power emanates, that political balances may be necessary to create and maintain rulers, and to check, limit, and control the people ; and whilst the pacific character of this Government has been, and ever will be, scrupulously maintained, by non-interference with their systems on their own continent, yet, on the American continents, where government emanates from the people, and the administrators are but the representatives of the popular will, no such political balance of power is necessary, and any and every attempt to enforce it here will be resisted by this Government.

Resolved, That the late indication, even by a friendly power, to introduce on the American continents the European system of balance of power, justifies the President in his annual message, in bringing the subject before Congress and the country, and in declaring before the world ‘ that the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects of future colonization by any European power,’ and that ‘ it should be distinctly announced to the world as our settled policy, that no European colony or dominion shall, with our consent, be planted or established on any part of these continents.’

Resolved, That the principle thus avowed, whilst it does not pretend to create or perfect title, has an immediate application to the Oregon Territory, where ‘ our title is clear and unquestionable,’ and as arisen, and its declaration and maintenance become necessary since the proposition was submitted to the British minister to adjust the boundary at the 49th degree of north latitude, and now precludes the Executive from accepting any proposition, or entering into any treaty, whereby any portion of the country westward of the Stony or Rocky Mountains shall be ceded to Great Britain.”

In what I say in committee, nor by these resolutions, do I mean to forestall or to outstrip the Executive; and here, as I have ever done elsewhere, I shall studiously avoid all sectional or local feeling, or any allusion to the North or the South, the East or the West, when a great national question is involved, such as I conceived the present to be.

The President, in his annual message, presents three principal questions for the consideration and action of Congress:

1. That it is the settled policy of this Government to resist all attempts to establish on the American continents a political balance of power, and to prevent any European Government from planting colonies or establishing any dominion on the North American continent.

2. A reduction of the tariff to the revenue standard, or indirect taxation to meet the expenses of the Government, and no more.

3. The establishing a constitutional Treasury, for the collection, keeping, and disbursing of the Government's money separate and distinct from all corporate or private interests.

All these are Executive measures, but the two last, whilst they are of deep import to the whole American people, effect us most in our internal and domestic relations, and on which we have legislated and acted until they have become essentially partizan. Not so with the first; it addresses itself more to our relations with European Governments, and especially with great Britain. This is the only issue presented by this Administration to the country. It finds its immediate and unavoidable application to the Oregon question, or "the country westward of the Stony or Rocky Mountains." On this subject the President recommends: 1. The giving of the notice now under consideration. 2. The extension of our laws and jurisdiction over the country. 3. The establishment of agencies and intercourse with the Indians. 4. A cordon of posts, with sufficient military force to protect our emigration there. And 5. The establishing mail facilities between that country and the States.

These recommendations, like the principle that includes them, I admit, have not assumed partizan casts, but they are not less the measures of the Administration than those of the Tariff and the Constitutional Treasury; nor are they the less important in my judgment, and I can most cordially give to the Administration my sincere support in all its recommendations. Even further if it should be thought necessary, I am willing to grant pre-emption to settlers on the soil west of the Stony or Rocky Mountains. I use this latter expression, Mr. Chairman, because it is the language of the treaty, and is most consonant with the principle of the Executive in regard to colonization and dominion by a foreign power on this continent; and because I believe, sir, that no good reason can be assigned for limiting our title to $54^{\circ} 40'$.

I do not intend to enter into an examination of title, but avail myself of the declaration that it is "*sustained by irrefragable facts and argument, and is clear and unquestionable*," not only to $54^{\circ} 40'$ but beyond. I concur with the gentleman from Illinois, (Mr. DOUGLASS,) that our treaty with Russia is like that with England, for fishing, hunting, and settlement by her people, not by the Government; but of one thing I am not mistaken, that by the express terms of the treaty, Russia was confined to the "*coast and the adjacent islands*," and has not occupied or claimed beyond this. Leaving to Russia, then, her treaty, with her possessions, (which I would not interrupt,) there remains between the Rocky Mountains, north of $54^{\circ} 40'$, an area of more than 500,000 square miles, which is included in our acquisition from Spain, and in our conventions with England, to which our title, as I believe, is as good as that portion of the country which lies between $49\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ and $54^{\circ} 40'$. And if any adjustment shall be made, by which the exclusive right of Great Britain shall be acknowledged to any part of this country, even north of $54^{\circ} 40'$, in less than a quarter of a century, it will be matter of astonishment to American statesmen and the American people that, with the avowal of the Executive, and the evidence of title which exist, Great Britain should have been permitted to *colonize* or acquire *domain* in any part of this territory. I therefore go for giving this notice, in the language of the treaty, for "the country westward of the Stony or Rocky Mountains," and maintaining our right to the whole, and nothing less than the whole, as against Great Britain.

But it is urged by those opposed to the notice, that if it should pass in the unqualified form reported by the committee, it is equivalent to declaration of war, and that it should be amended so as to leave the subject discretionary with the President.

I would not put it in the power of the Executive to do that indirectly which the Constitution inhibits directly, to declare war, or to do any act not clearly conferred by the Constitution, which would necessarily lead to war. Neither would I cast the responsibility on the Executive when the subject does not belong to him, but let Congress, where the matter properly belongs, decide and act upon it, and leave the President to carry out their legislation. To the proposed amendment I am opposed, and if it prevails I will vote against the notice.

But, Mr. Chairman, I do not believe there is any war in this subject. I admit that the issue of war or of peace is with Great Britain. If she desires war with us, she will not want a pretext;

and though we give her the whole of Oregon, yet, through Mexico, or some other means, she will find her occasion. If she desires peace, she will yield the question, and give you the whole of the country. What her policy is I do not know, and I have but little confidence in the speculations of those here who assume to point it out. My humble opinion is, that she does not desire war with us; but if, after rejecting the magnanimous and pacific offer which has been made her, she shall make the giving of this notice, which, by her solemn treaty she has stipulated we might give, the occasion for war, then is she manifestly wrong, and we shall never stand more clearly justified in the eyes of the civilized world than on this ground. It will be her war, not ours. It will not be an attempt to conquer England on our part, as is strangely asserted by those here who parade England's wealth, England's power, and England's navy, in opposing this notice, and as I believe this Administration, but a conscious and determined maintainance of our principles and our rights on our own soil, against her aggressions and encroachments.

But it is asked if we adhere to our rights, what can England do? How can she escape from the ground she has assumed? And when has she been known to yield a position which she has taken? To these inquiries I answer, she can do as she has before done on more occasions than one, with this country: yield her interference and pretensions unjustly put forward.

I do not mean to say that England is not powerful, that she is not haughty, or that she has not offered us insult and injury, for which she has not atoned: but I mean to say distinctly, that whenever the principle now involved, of the extension and maintenance of our territory and jurisdiction, has arisen, that England, in her own right, or in behalf of some ally, either civilized or savage, has opposed; and in every instance where she has been met with firmness, she has invariably yielded the ground. For this I appeal to the diplomatic history of the country, content with referring you to two or three instances.

Passing without comment the position that England occupied in 1803, 1804, and 1805, in relation to the acquisition of Louisiana—I refer more especially to the subject of Florida. During the administration of Mr. Madison, when this Government was seeking to obtain possession, vindicating our title, and about to extend our jurisdiction and laws over that country, Great Britain, in October and December, 1810, and July and September, 1811, interposed, and formally announced to this Government that she could not, and would not, permit us to accomplish what we desired; and if we persisted, we subjected ourselves to the imputation of “*ambitious motives*,” “a disposition for foreign conquest,” and for “territorial aggrandizement.” Such were the identical expressions used by her minister to this Government. This Government went forward, maintained its rights, obtained formal possession, and extended its jurisdiction. No war ensued, and Florida is now one of the States of this Union.

Again, in 1814, at Ghent, when this Government was treating with Great Britain, in the protocol presented by her commissioners, the second article required the United States to mark out and definitely assign boundaries to the territory of the different Indian tribes, (which, as I understand it, included as well those in alliance with us as with England, and as well those tribes within our States and Territories as those on other parts of the *North American continent*,) and that the territory thus marked out and defined, should never afterwards be acquired by treaty or otherwise to this Government. This, it was positively announced, was a *sine qua non*. It was put forward a second and a third time, in the same solemn and imposing manner, and as decidedly met by the American ministers; and the last time the British commissioners were told decidedly, that if this article was insisted on the convention would adjourn without coming to any understanding. The British ministers abandoned their ground, and a treaty was made, without embracing any such principle. I insist on a consideration of the manner, the occasion, and the nature of the position thus assumed, and thus abandoned by the British Government.

These are not the only instances. During the administration of Mr. Monroe, after the treaty of Ghent, by which England was bound to deliver Astoria, in the country now in dispute, she declined; a diplomatic correspondence was had, and the venerable member from Massachusetts, (Mr. Adams,) then Secretary of State, in maintaining our rights and the obligations of the treaty of

Ghent, on the 20th May, 1818, instructed Mr. Rush, our minister, to say to the British Government: "If the United States leave her (England) in undisputed enjoyment of all her holds upon Europe, Asia, and Africa, with all her actual possessions in this hemisphere, we may very fairly expect that she will not think it consistent either with a wise or friendly policy to watch with eyes of jealousy and alarm every possibility of extension to our natural *dominion* in *North America*, which she can have no solid interest to prevent, until all *possibility* of her preventing it shall have vanished." Here you have the very principle, laid down by the Executive, in relation to colonization and dominion in North America, and here it is as broad and as clear as it is in the President's Message, and here you have its application to this very subject under consideration. After this announcement, in the face of her own pretensions, England yielded; and on the 6th October, 1818, formally delivered possession of Astoria to this Government. And I believe, if she is sincere in her desire for peace, she will yield now to us our rights, and abandon the entire country west of the Rocky Mountains.

But it is urged by those opposed to giving this notice, that it will prevent further treaty, and all prospect of future compromise. To this I answer, I would not interfere with the treaty-making power, and this notice will not—but I am opposed to any compromise of this question—I do not see how it can be effected without compromising the Administration with it. Texas and Oregon were in issue in the Presidential contest, as well as a revenue Tariff and a constitutional Treasury. And is there an intelligent man who believes for one moment that Mr. Polk could have been elected on the Tariff and Treasury questions without the principle involved in Texas and Oregon? It seems to me there is not. Texas is admitted—Oregon remains—and in it is to be tested the broad questions of Foreign *Colonization* and Foreign *Dominion* on the *North American continent*. The moment any compromise is made by which the exclusive right of Great Britain is acknowledged to any portion of the territory west of the Rocky Mountains, even north of $54^{\circ} 40'$, between the Rocky Mountains and the Russian territory, you allow her to colonize, and especially do you give her *dominion*. The moment you compromise at 49° , you recognize her right to colonize, and grant her *dominion* in the most essential part of the Oregon Territory, notwithstanding the declaration of the proposition, "that it should be distinctly announced to the world as our settled policy, that no such thing, "with our consent," should be permitted. Compromise this question and pass, if you can with the present Congress, your Tariff and constitutional Treasury laws, and Mr. Polk will be compelled, before he leaves the Presidential chair, to sign or veto bills for their repeal; more than this, the majority that are in power with him will be scattered to the winds. In my humble judgment, he will be driven to sign or veto bills for internal improvements of the most latitudinarian character. And he will leave the Presidential chair with less regret, and more reproach from his countrymen and odium from abroad, than any man who has ever filled it. On the other hand, if the President stands firm, as I believe he will, and maintains inflexibly the principle he has avowed: "no foreign *interference*," foreign *colonization*, and foreign *dominion*, all is well—it is his country's cause—the people are with him; and though he is without a party in Congress, and although the House and the Senate, and even a Cabinet be against him, he has nothing to fear. The whole of Oregon, like the whole of Texas, will be ours, and the President will rally around him a party not by the old organization, but of the Democratic elements of the country, in the country's cause more formidable than any President since the days of Washington.

But it is urged that the President is bound to accept the 49° if offered by Great Britain. This is denied; and those who should sustain the affirmative, and show sufficient reason, evade it by asking, "what can the President do if England refuses to approve the act of her minister in rejecting the proposal of the President and agrees to accept it?" This ingenious question they answer themselves, by asserting: "He cannot avoid settling at the 49^{th} deg. without dishonour." He is "bound to do it." This is more specious than sound. It assumes, first, either that by such refusal of Great Britain, the proposition of the President would be reinstated, or he would be bound to renew it. Not so, the proposition has been made—it has been rejected; and it has been unqualifiedly withdrawn. The matter now stands as though no such proposal had been made, and

act of the British Government, or her minister, can change the aspect so as to reinstate the proposal, or require the President to renew it. There is nothing for England to accept, nor is there any thing from which the President would have to recede : or, secondly, it assumes that Great Britain will propose the same line, the 49°, that has been once submitted to her. What England will propose I do not know, but if she should propose the 49°, it becomes now her original proposition, and the President is no more bound to accept it, than he would be any other proposition she might submit. I maintain there is no rule of honor for a nation that is not applicable to the citizen, and there is no rule of honor for the individual that conflicts with the rule of law, of right, and of sound morals. This rule between adversaries allows one of the parties *magnanimously* to offer terms by which he would yield his own rights—yea, even to buy peace ; and it shall not be converted into an acknowledgment of right, nor shall it create obligation. And if the offer is rejected, no prejudice shall arise. And even pending the offer, if any circumstance shall arise affecting the right or the principle, it may be withdrawn ; and after it has been rejected, the same, or a similar offer made, need not be accepted. No right is admitted—no honorable, legal, or moral obligation is incurred or violated in any such case. Neither the offer nor the refusal can even be given as evidence, is the universal language of law amongst civilized men. How, then, stands the question ? The President has given his reasons, and they are neither those of *avarice* nor of *fear*, but in his own true character and that of his countrymen, he offered the 49°, believing, as he well might, that a great and a mighty nation like England would appreciate the *magnanimity* and the *generosity* with which the offer was made, and respond to it from the same high motives. In this the President was mistaken. The aspect is now most materially changed. An important circumstance has arisen which interposes. The offer was made on the 12th of July, 1845—it was rejected on the 29th of the same month. During the succeeding month, of August, or perhaps September, the intelligence was received here of an avowal by a powerful nation, that strikes home to the principle and covers this very question. From whence came this, and what was it ? Why, Mr. Chairman, it was from the first minister of the nation, with whom we have been upon the most friendly terms, and with whom every generous and friendly emotion of the American heart has been associated, and desires to continue, whilst the name of him who adorns the canvass on your left shall have a place in our remembrance ; and whilst we were asserting our title to Oregon to be clear and unquestionable, and with the consent of Texas we had a right to annex her to our Union, a philosophical indifference is avowed in the startling announcement that France would not further interfere with these questions nor our rights, than to maintain a *balance of power* on these continents. How was this announcement received ? Why, sir, the first moment was one of silent but universal surprise ; the second was one of as universal deliberation ; and this was succeeded by a settled determination of the American people to resist every such attempt, to repel it from whence it might ; and in doing so, and in maintaining our own principles and our rights, to resist all future *colonization* and acquisition of *dominion* on this continent. The President felt with his countrymen, and in his message could do no less than express their sentiments. He has done it in the language he used on this subject. It is the language of truth and our national reservation. And the President cannot go back, as he will do, if he compromises the Oregon question.

There is another matter that has arisen, since this proposition was submitted to the British minister, that is not to be overlooked. Whilst those who oppose this notice denominate it a war measure, and portray its consequences, there is what I denominate a *peace policy*, and it has its consequences. I will not say in that policy there is any attempt to manufacture Presidential capital, but I will say to those who charge such an attempt on the supporters of this notice, that the Oregon question is of such magnitude with the American people, that it will grind to dust the name of any man who may attempt to associate himself with it for the Presidency. On the 13th of November last a Convention was held at Memphis, over which a distinguished gentleman presided. That gentleman now heads the opposition in Congress to the present measure, and whether it be from a desire to hold a *balance of power* to control the Executive, or not,

it accounts for the opposition from certain quarters to the present measure. In that convention is clearly shadowed forth the policy of that gentleman and his friends. The inevitable consequences of two or three rules laid down by the president of the convention, show clearly the object. It is first to force the barrier established by the veto of General Jackson in 1830, and maintained by the veto of President Tyler in 1844, and the way is clear to extravagant appropriations for internal improvements on the most latitudinarian scale. Here is the evidence: The project of a railroad from Memphis, in the valley of the Mississippi, to Atalanta, on the Atlantic coast, is denominated a *great highway*, and the presiding officer says: "This is not a matter to be left to individual States. It is one of high national importance." In speaking of the Mississippi and its tributaries, which are denominated inland seas, the same officer adds: "I believe the free and uninterrupted navigation of *these inland seas* (so to speak) is within the *peculiar* province of the General Government." In concluding, he adds: "I have now passed slightly over all the subjects before this body, and now let me say to you that, if there is any *battle* to be fought upon the adjustment of these important matters, *let it be done in Congress, not here—this is not the place!* Our position here is a remarkable one! It will not be twenty years before we shall be called upon to unite, by a solid and indissoluble link, the Atlantic and the Pacific." Comment is unnecessary. He that runs may read. Already, in accordance with the suggestion, the subject has been introduced into this House and the Senate, and those who are the most prominent and untiring in their opposition to the Oregon notice, if they shall not be found equally prominent and untiring in opposing the position taken by the President against foreign interference, are the undoubted advocates of the measure here proposed. And whilst its advocates here hold up high tariffs, inflation of the paper currency, a national debt, and National Bank as consequences of what they denominate a war measure, in this peace policy I see these consequences, one and all; though less perceptible, are not the less certain, nor will they be of less magnitude. And, sir, which now would be the first, the last, and the sufficient argument of this opposition against this notice, if you had a debt of two or five hundred millions of dollars? It would be this debt. This latitudinarian improvement policy, if fairly introduced, fixes this and a greater amount upon the country irrevocably; and it will be the ready and efficient argument in all future time against maintaining our principles and our rights, resenting encroachments, or repelling aggression from Great Britain, or any other nation. True, sir, I admit this policy is held in check by the present interest that is felt on the subject before Congress and the country, and it may also be true that the laurels which were won by the president of that convention may be plucked from his brow by the stand he has taken in relation to Oregon; and it may be difficult to induce the States that have incurred so many millions of debt in making their own improvement, to submit to the burdens of additional taxation by which the General Government shall make railroads and canals through the States that have hitherto kept aloof. Yet the elements that enter into this policy are formidable, and its organization one of the most powerful that has been formed in the country. Even on this floor it has its advocates, as I believe, unconsciously; and the President may be driven to the veto, to prevent the most extravagant appropriations, before this Congress terminates. All this is developed since the proposition was made and withdrawn; and although I do not express an opinion, yet, Mr. Chairman, it is a question worthy the gravest consideration, whether, if a war ensues, with all its consequences, in defence of the principle avowed by the President, and of our rights in Oregon, it were not better for the perpetuity of our institutions, the advancement of liberal principles, and for posterity, than such a peace policy and its consequences, as here indicated.